Harem Fantasies and Music Videos: Contemporary Orientalist Representation

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-nf9f-6h02

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Harem Fantasies and Music Videos: Contemporary Orientalist Representation

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary
August 2007
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a number of young female pop singers have incorporated into their music video performances dance, costuming, and musical motifs that suggest references to dance, costume, and musical forms from the Orient. In the first chapter, I examine how European and American Orientalism — a broad, complex, and often contradictory system of Western representation of a geographic area including the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia — of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a body of artistic visual representations that presented an imaginary harem as the preeminent space for interaction between males and females in the Orient. This gendered Orientalist imagery continually reproduced a set of sexualized and racialized stock characters that also appear in early twenty-first century music videos and are used to render stories of desire, difference, and possession. The second chapter examines issues of the body, role-playing, and race. I consider the music video performers’ participation in their audio-visual fantasies in the context of Orientalist representation, focusing on the ways in which cultural cross-dressing and role-playing deny the agency of the women supposedly represented by these performances. I also reflect on the ways that Orientalist role-play interacts with stereotyped regional and racial identities already inscribed on American women’s bodies. I conclude this study by considering the overall cultural work of the music videos I have discussed, specifically how they are presented as hidden narratives of nationalistic superiority.
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This thesis is dedicated to my very patient parents, Archer and Roberta Johnson.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professors Grey Gundaker, Arthur Knight, and Kimberley Phillips for their thoughtful suggestions and invaluable guidance in the preparation of this thesis.
Introduction

In recent years, a number of young female pop singers have incorporated into their music video performances dance, costuming, and musical motifs that suggest references to dance, costume, and musical forms from the Orient.1 These Middle Eastern-tinged performances by artists such as Britney Spears and Beyoncé Knowles2 coincided with the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001, and their appearance at this moment in United States history is cause for study. However, because the presentation of harems and sexualized Otherness in the music videos harkens back to previous Orientalist images, these videos’ connection to a larger, modern genealogy of Western representations of the Orient is equally compelling and worthy of attention. It is on the music videos’ connection to an Orientalist harem past that I will focus in this thesis.

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1 I will use the term ‘Orient’ to encompass the Near East (including North Africa) as well as South and Central Asia. This usage has two purposes. First, I am drawing on and building from Edward Said’s original Orientalism and I want to maintain, as much as possible, continuity between theory and the geographical areas represented by theory. The second reason is that the dance steps included in the videos seem to blend various Middle Eastern as well as Indian dance forms, and a term encompassing both areas is necessary. While the Orientalism I am critiquing in this thesis deals with the Near East, South Asia, and Central Asia, it is important to note that the term Orientalism can also refer to parallel practices in the West concerning East and Southeast Asia.

In the first chapter, I will examine how European and American Orientalism—a broad, complex, and often contradictory system of Western representation of a geographic area including the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia—of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a body of artistic visual representations that presented an imaginary harem as the preeminent space for interaction between males and females in the Orient. This gendered Orientalist imagery continually reproduced a set of sexualized and racialized stock characters. While these characters appeared in a number of artistic sites, both visual and performed, mid- to late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Orientalist painting survives as the richest visual collection of these characters. Moving ahead in time, the second section locates the stock characters in the music videos that inspired this project and investigates how the characters are used to render stories of desire, difference, and possession.

The second chapter examines issues of the body, role-playing, and race. In the music videos that I discuss, contemporary American women place themselves in Oriental fantasies—whether through costuming, scenery, or types of movement. I consider the performers’ participation in such fantasies in the context of Orientalist representation, focusing on the ways in which cultural cross-dressing and role-playing denies the agency of the women supposedly represented by these performances. I also reflect on the ways that Orientalist role-play interacts with stereotyped regional and racial identities already inscribed on American women’s bodies.

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3 I use the terms America and American here to refer solely to the United States of America.
I conclude this study by considering the overall cultural work of the music videos I have discussed, specifically how they are presented not only as depictions of foreign decadence – thus obfuscating American decadence – but also as hidden narratives of nationalistic superiority.
Edward Said’s *Orientalism*

Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, originally published in 1978, is a critique, revealing the motivations and methods of Orientalist scholars. In a later essay, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” Said emphasizes the fact that his work— which has since become the central work of contemporary anti-Orientalist scholarship—is a portrait and exposé of academic work, the very heart of which simultaneously supports and is supported by the practices of imperialism. However, Said argues that scholarship does not matter merely because it is tied to practice, but also that studying Orientalism itself matters politically. The ways we represent the world around us and the people who inhabit it undoubtedly shape the policies that define our official and unofficial interactions with Eastern peoples, and Said argues that eighteenth and nineteenth century European scholars of the Orient—a convenient geographic reduction of the Middle East (including North Africa) and South Asia—were members of an elite intellectual institution that shaped beliefs about the Orient for their imperial nations.

The Orientalist scholars discussed in *Orientalism* believed that the inhabitants of the Orient were residents of a once-impressive region and claimed that “their great moments were in the past” and that “they are useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date [European] empires have effectively brought them out of the wretchedness of their decline and turned them into rehabilitated residents of

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productive colonies.”5 Said explains that the Orient takes on meaning for the Orientalist not because the Orientalist believes the Orient is inherently worth consideration, but because the Orient can be held up as evidence of the Occident’s goodness. The Orient is a place to be known, while the professional Orientalist presumes that the Occident does not need to be explored in the same way. The Orientalist collapses the geography of his imagined region into an easily knowable object:

To speak of scholarly specialization as a geographical “field” is, in the case of Orientalism, fairly revealing since no one is likely to imagine a field symmetrical to it called Occidentalism. Already the special, perhaps even eccentric attitude of Orientalism becomes apparent. For although many learned disciplines imply a position taken towards, say, human material … there is no real analogy for taking a fixed, more or less total geographical position towards a wide variety of social, linguistic, political, and historical realities.6

By considering the various land areas and groups of people of which the Orient is comprised as a single object of study, academic Orientalists build into their discipline a sense of ease. From their perspective, the Orient is knowable. And the knowledge sought by the academic Orientalist is, at its core, a product of the assumption that difference – more specifically, distinction from modern Western norms – is synonymous with inferiority, as evidenced in Said’s description of the assumptions of British imperialism:

Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a “fact” which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically, stable. To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And

6 Said, 50.
authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it” – the Oriental country – since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it. British knowledge of Egypt is Egypt for Balfour, and the burdens of knowledge make such questions as inferiority and superiority seem petty ones. Balfour nowhere denies British superiority and Egyptian inferiority; he takes them for granted.  

Said’s *Orientalism* examines the role of knowledge in gaining and maintaining political power, particularly in situations in which the powerful come from distant geographical areas and different cultural backgrounds than those over whom they wield power. More than a decade after the publication of *Orientalism*, Said commented that Western knowledge-seekers demonstrate what has become a typical Orientalist naivete or voluntary ignorance that presumes “that the Western quest for knowledge about other societies is unique, that it is motivated by pure curiosity, and that in contrast Muslims neither were able nor interested in getting knowledge about Europe, as if knowledge about Europe were the only acceptable criterion for true knowledge.”

Said’s *Orientalism* focuses primarily on European literature. But we cannot overlook the importance of images in the maintenance of Orientalist nationalist fictions of the West, including the United States. Said remains helpful, though, because the basic elements of his analysis – most importantly his use of knowledge (of the Other) and power (over the Other) – can be applied to visual texts as well, and it is visual texts that form the central focus of this paper.

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7 Said, 32.

Gender and Orientalist Representation

Americans have engaged in Orientalist practices of their own. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Melani McAlister argues, the United States developed its direct interests in the Middle East:

The Middle East has loomed large as a U.S. interest, especially since 1945, when the United States became a global superpower and the Middle East became one of the most contested regions in the world. ... Representations of the Middle East – of both the ancient religious sites and the modern nations – helped to make the area and its people meaningful within the cultural and political context in the United States.9

The late twentieth century witnessed the development of unprecedented American political and economic interests in the Middle East. However, Americans’ gendered Orientalist attitudes toward the Middle East and South and Central Asia hint at the strong undercurrent of eroticism that has been part of transatlantic Orientalist thought that has been at work for well over a century. Dolores Mitchell suggests that erotic Orientalism was originally a European invention. Many American commercial artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries studied in Europe and, upon their return to the United States, incorporated both the artistic techniques and attitudes they learned there. In addition, many German printers immigrated to America in the late nineteenth century, bringing with them their own particular worldviews along with their printing techniques. Thus, in her essay on turn-of-the-century tobacco art, Mitchell argues that the portrayals of exotic women “reflect European colonial

attitudes toward race as much as they do attitudes prevalent in the United States.” If
the notion of eroticizing the Oriental Other was born in Europe, however, it matured
considerably in America.

Like academic Orientalists, popular Orientalists such as the creators of tobacco
art also collapse a variety of people and places into a single Orient. Ella Shohat writes
that Hollywood representations of the Orient have “superimposed the visual traces of
civilization as diverse as Arab, Persian, Chinese, and Indian into a single portrayal of
the exotic Orient, treating cultural plurality as if it were a monolith.” Hollywood’s
Orient, Shohat argues, is approached from the Western male perspective, which causes
the Orient’s multiple nations and terrains to be seen as a single, unchanging
environment. McAlister argues that “the Middle East was not immediately available
as an American interest; instead, it had to be made ‘interesting.’” One method of
making the Orient interesting is what Shohat terms “the Western rescue fantasy.” In
one form of this fantasy, Western knowledge of the Orient as well as the presumed
ignorance of the Orient’s people places both the burden and the triumph of capturing
the Orient’s past glories on Western men:

In Raiders of the Lost Ark, the full significance of ancient archeological objects is
presumed to be understood only by the Western scientists, relegating Egyptians to the
role of ignorant Arabs who happen to be sitting on a land full of historical treasures –
much as they happen to ‘sit’ on oil. The origins of archaeology as a discipline are

Studies 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 328.
12 Shohat, 40.
13 McAlister, 2.
14 Shohat, 40.
inextricably linked to imperial expansionism. Yet *Indiana Jones* reproduces the colonial vision in which Western ‘knowledge’ of ancient civilizations ‘rescues’ the past from oblivion. This masculine rescue legitimizes denuding Egyptians of their heritage and confining it within Western metropolitan museums.\(^{15}\)

The rescue fantasy, therefore, “metaphorically renders the Orient as a female saved from her own destructiveness.”\(^ {16}\) However, Shohat points out that Hollywood’s rescue fantasy is often also “a narrative of the rescue of Arab and Western women from Arab men.”\(^ {17}\) In saving women from barbarous men, the Western male becomes the sole mediator of desire in the Orient, further legitimizing his own patriarchal imperial interests.

Meyda Yegenoglu argues that the Orientalist power-knowledge concept continually depends on gendered desires, that the “Western subject’s desire for its Oriental Other is always mediated by his desire to have access to the space of its woman, to the body of its woman and to the truth of its woman.”\(^ {18}\) Indeed, Yegenoglu assertst that the Orient has been, in the eyes of the West, the embodiment of sensuality and “is always understood in feminine terms.”\(^ {19}\) That the West should want to unveil some hidden truth about the Orient exposes a connection in the West between the Orient as a region and the Orient as a collection of bodies – primarily female or feminized – both awaiting entry. This penetration of intimate spaces and

\(^{15}\) Shohat, 41.

\(^{16}\) Shohat, 40.

\(^{17}\) Shohat, 40.


\(^{19}\) Yegeneoglu, 56.
unveiling of intimate bodies will supposedly reveal all the knowledge about the Orient that the West could ever need.

The *hammam*, or public bath, offered nineteenth century European Orientalist painters the ideal private interior space on which to place their imaginary gaze. French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres first exhibited *The Turkish Bath* [Figure 1] in 1862. The painting depicts about twenty nude women in various postures of sumptuous repose; some are reclining on cushions, one happily dipping her feet into the community bath’s water, one scenting another’s hair with incense. The light-skinned and mostly light-haired bathers are attended by two black servants, one of whom entertains the bathers with her tambourine playing.

![Figure 1: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1862, Musee du Louvre, Paris](image-url)
Jean-Leon Gerome’s *The Great Bath at Bursa* [Figure 2], first exhibited in 1885, is less densely populated with women. And, unlike in Ingres’s bath, the women do not touch or share caresses, although their gazes do suggest attention being paid to other bathers, perhaps in conversation.

![Image of Jean-Leon Gerome's The Great Bath at Bursa](image)

**Figure 2: Jean-Leon Gerome, *The Great Bath at Bursa*, 1885, Private Collection**

In the memoir of her quest to understand Western male perceptions of the harem, Moroccan historian, Fatima Mernissi demystifies the Frenchmen’s fantastic *hammam*. She points out that public baths have been perceived quite differently in the Muslim and Christian worlds. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, “baths are often used as preparatory rituals to important acts involving the crossing of new frontiers in time and space ... Since this conception of the [public] bath as a cleansing ritual is completely lacking in Christian culture, it is not especially surprising that many
Western artists were drawn to what they regarded as an exotic Oriental fantasy.\textsuperscript{20} Mernissi continues, noting that, in viewing Ingres’s *The Turkish Bath*, she recognized something familiar:

Ingres’s imaginary *Turkish Bath* looked “normal” to me at first, because most of the women in the painting were not looking at one another, which is also usually the case in the Oriental hammam. We Muslim women don’t rush to the baths to look at our neighbors … The rule in the Rabat baths is to concentrate on scrubbing off your dead skin with a harsh cloth, replenishing your oils with ghassoul, then applying a light layer of henna paste to give your skin a nice hue. You avoid talking to your neighbors because it will spoil your concentration on sensuality. This atmosphere of complete self-absorption is also strong in Ingres’s *Turkish Bath*. Each of his odalisques is looking at some vague point on her narcissistic horizon, totally self-centered.\textsuperscript{21}

However, the differences between Ingres’s work and her experience of public baths in her native city of Rabat could not be reconciled:

But what reminded me that Ingres’s *Turkish Bath* depicted a territory foreign to me was the fact that two of the women were erotically caressing each other. That would be impossible in a Moroccan hammam for the simple reason that it is a public space, often overrun with dozens of noisy children. Erotic pleasure in Morocco belongs in preciously sheltered private places.\textsuperscript{22}

Mernissi describes a contemporary hammam in which silence is key to the experience of one’s own serenity and sensuousness. Algerian novelist Assia Djebar describes a more social hammam at the start of her novel *So Vast the Prison*. Here, women talk to one another, catching up on the latest news and learning their neighbors’ histories:

I went with my mother-in-law, who would meet her friends there in the mist and the cries of children in the hot steam room. Some of these older women, matrons,  

\textsuperscript{20} Fatema (Fatima) Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 100. Mernissi’s reference to a monolithic Christian culture is unfortunate, and one might imagine that the existence of public baths in the Roman Empire was not completely erased from the cultural memory of southern Europe with the spread of Christianity.

\textsuperscript{21} Mernissi, 101-02.

\textsuperscript{22} Mernissi, 102.
parading around in their striped tunics, made the bathing ceremony an interminable ritual, with its solemn liturgy and melancholy languor.

There one encountered mothers also, humble, worn out, and surrounded by their brood, and there were sometimes also young, harshly beautiful women (whose behavior the distrustful bourgeois matrons viewed with suspicion). Ostentatiously immodest, they would remove every hair from their bodies but not the heavy gold jewelry that still sparkled around their necks and naked, wet arms ... I would wind up being the only one to make polite conversation with them afterward in the large, cold room.

Like many of the women, I felt the pleasure of the baths upon leaving them. Carpeted with mats and mattresses, the antechamber became a haven of delights where you were served peeled oranges, open pomegranates, and barley water to your heart's content. Perfumes mingled above the bodies of sleeping women and engulfed the shivering ones, who slowly dressed as they spun their colorful threads of gossip.23

However, neither Djebar’s social hammam nor Mernissi’s self-absorbed hammam anticipate the male gaze, which is pervasive in both Ingres’s and Gerome’s fantastic baths. This important distinction points to a serious lack in both painters’ experience24 — most likely mediated through female European sources and embellished by their own fantasies — and depictions of the hammam. What results from second-hand accounts and imperialist imaginations is a gendered Orientalist representation, much akin to the films Shohat describes, in which the Westerner comes to know the Orient through his stealthy, imaginary invasion of its intimate spaces.

Stock Characters in the Harem Family

Aside from the hammam, the harem was the favored intimate space for Orientalist artists of the nineteenth century. Sexuality in the harem is explicit, unlike the implicit sexuality of the Western male gaze in depictions of baths. In the


24 Gerome, speaking of The Great Bath at Bursa, admitted that the female bathers in the final painting are substituted for male bathers from the baths in which he did his original sketches. ArtFact,
Orientalist imagination, the harem is the meeting place for male and female, which has obvious sexual connotations. But the Orientalist harem is not solely peopled by powerful men and their submissive, sexually available concubines; rather, there is a more complex cast of characters whose presence constructs the meaning of harem tableaux.

Of course, at the center of the harem is the female slave, often termed an odalisque. The sexualized odalisque is always depicted with light skin, and she is often identified ethnically as Turkish or white European, sometimes as Arab. Perhaps the best-known odalisque portrait is Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *Grand Odalisque* (1814) [Figure 3] which shows from the rear a light-haired woman reclining, holding a feather fan. She is nude except for a tasseled and jeweled turban and three beaded bracelets. (She looks directly at the viewer, which anticipates the unwavering eye contact in the music videos that inspired this project and are discussed in the next section.)

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25 The Orientalist harem is almost always a representation of the harems of powerful men such as kings. The luxury of the surroundings attests to this.

26 *Odalisque* is derived from the Turkish *odalik*, which originally meant chambermaid, but has come to stand for concubine. The word was first used in Orientalist discourse to refer specifically to concubines in the Ottoman royal harem. However, over time the term has also been used to identify women of Arab and Persian harems as well.
Often when she is not depicted alone, the odalisque is attended by a black female servant. Also, a number of harem paintings depict groups of harem women attended by a black female. This servant does not take part in the languid pleasures of the harem; her role is apparently to see to the needs of the concubines. In a few depictions, the black servant is a male, ostensibly a eunuch who guards the harem.

The last common harem character is the ‘owner’ of the harem. Many artists chose to leave him out – quite possibly so that the viewer could envision himself as the lord of the harem. When he does appear, he is possessively touching one of the harem women who in turn looks up to him pleasantly, as in Rudolf Ernest’s The Favourite [Figure 4].
In an environment in which sexual intercourse is a constant possibility – promise, even – it is significant that children are rarely present in Orientalist renderings of the harem. And even when children do appear, they are often identified as servants, not offspring, of the harem women. Fatima Mernissi’s childhood memories, presented in her memoir *Dreams of Trespass* demonstrate that the harem was actually a space inhabited by women *and* young children – male and female
alike.27 And, as we have previously read, both Mernissi and Djebar note the presence of children in their brief descriptions of North African communal baths.

There is a final character who is never visible in the paintings but who is, nonetheless always present: the viewer. While many Orientalist paintings were seen by women when they were first painted – those by French painters such as Ingres, Delacroix, and Gerome were often exhibited publicly – the presumed audience is the male. It is the European male’s gaze, understanding, and enjoyment for which these painting are styled. The absent male viewer can be considered a character because the very nature of the Orientalist harem allows for the viewer’s insertion of himself into the tableau.

Sexualized depictions of the Orient are not limited to fictional accounts. Among a number of scholars who have written about how American news media represent the Orient as a site of sexual turmoil, Anne Norton uncovers the double meaning of the word domestic in American journalistic images of Iraq during the first Gulf war:

The double reference in “domestic” to internal politics and to the home operates constantly in these accounts, oscillating between references to the male tyranny of the imagined harem and references to contemporary national politics. This association acknowledges in sexuality a political character still commonly deprecated in the West, as it imputes to Arab politics a sexual significance purportedly absent in the West.28

27 Fatima Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood, photographs by Ruth V. Ward (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1994, 3-7. It is important to note that the women in the lived harem of Mernissi’s experience were wives, not slaves or concubines. Orientalist paintings rarely make overt reference to harem women as wives.

Western disgust with the supposed hyper-sexuality of Arab politics finds its legitimization in the Western harem fantasy. Norton argues that the harem in popular culture has, over the years, developed an “international dimension.” Norton writes, “Movies and soap opera episodes portray the harem as a place of subjection not only for women in general, but for [white] Western women in particular.” Another development in the Western harem is a shift in pleasure that further buttresses an Orientalist thesis that conflates sexuality with violence in the Orient:

The image of the harem in 19th century Orientalist art and literature was one of sensual pleasure and a catholic sexuality. These portraits commonly assumed male readers, male viewers, but they offered images of sensual pleasure to women as well as men. The women were portrayed bathing, caressing each other, playing cards, listening to music, telling stories, eating sweets, in settings of architectural and decorative beauty. In mid- to late-20th century portrayals, the women are commonly occupied only with the pleasure of men. The harem is pictured as a prison for women held captive by male violence.

The violence of the Orientalist harem is perpetrated by the Western male, but Orientalist representation, whether through nineteenth century painting or twentieth century news reportage, sublimates the Western male’s violence into that of the Middle Eastern male.

The figure of the bad father has acquired almost archetypal status in contemporary American cinematic representation of “the enemy.” The fullest expression of the type is the dark father, Darth Vader, armed with an almost (but not quite) invincible war machine that must be stopped ... The reiterated image of Saddam Hussein with hostage women and children called up the image of the dark father, the patriarchal threat.

29 Norton, 27.
30 Norton, 27.
31 Norton, 27.
In addition to creating a visible enemy in the Other, the depiction of the bad father helps to mask the violence and inequality in the Orientalist’s home territory. Imperial relations do not simply entail Western states’ domination over other parts of the globe; rather, imperialism and its accompanying matrices of imperial sciences such as Orientalism often work to obscure inequalities in the West as well. Norton notes that as a symbol of foreign oppression, the veil “attracts our gaze to Arab domination of women [and] detracts it from an examination of the domination of women in the West.”

During the twentieth century, the imaginary Orient made frequent appearances in American film. In these cultural productions, actresses often echoed many postures found in the Orientalist paintings of the nineteenth century. The sexually charged harem rescue fantasy found its small screen realization in the television series *I Dream of Jeannie*. In the 1980s, American museums rekindled their fascination with original works of Orientalist art. During the first Gulf War, the film *Not without my Daughter* reinvigorated the rescue fantasy of early Hollywood but replaced the flirtatious enjoyment of the harem with weighty politics. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the stage was set for the bold new take on Orientalist imagery offered by

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32 I borrow this phrase from Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” 94.
33 Norton, 28.
35 *Not without my Daughter* (1991) is a film adaptation of Betty Mahmoody’s memoir about escaping her husband’s native Iran in the mid-1980s.
a number of American pop music stars in which the pleasure of the harem fantasy was revived, danger was averted, and the male gaze was distanced from political concerns and concentrated on fun.

**Casting the Orientalist Harem in Music Videos**

Like parents speaking for their child, Orientalists – academic and popular, alike – have given themselves the authority to represent and re-present the Orient. In this section, I will examine how self-appointed pop spokeswomen have used that authority in a medium devoid of talk. I will examine two music videos by Britney Spears and Mandy Moore in which multiethnic casting and riffs on Middle Eastern dance and attire draw our attention to an underlying connection between Orientalist conceptions of the harem as a family structure.

For centuries, sex has been central to Western perceptions of Middle Eastern family structures. Whereas the East-West familial relationships discussed by Christina Klein and Marina Heung focus on the integration of Southeast Asian children into Western families, no such adoption ethic has prevailed in American discourse on the Middle Eastern family, as Mernissi so aptly argues in *Scheherazade Goes West*. The embarrassment and amusement demonstrated by Western males in response to

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Mernissi’s use of the word “harem”\textsuperscript{37} points directly to preeminence of the mythical harem as the Western standard for ideas of family in the Middle East. Because the Western harem is centered on powerful males – a.k.a bad fathers – with absolute sexual control over numerous women, children – who are normally a part of ‘generic’ Western conceptions of family – only populate the Western harem as invisible, potential results of the harem’s sexual activity. Thus, sex and domination, not procreation, are the central components of the Orientalist conception of the Middle Eastern harem/family.

Norton’s description of the development of the Western view of the harem suggests a transformation of pleasure for the women of the harem: from the pleasure of active participation to the lack of pleasure in exhibitionist submission. In part, the exhibitionist bent of the music videos that inspired this project is not surprising because the music video is created in order to give visual life to recorded music. But the ways in which Britney Spears, in particular, interacts with her imagined audience – most notably through eye contact in conjunction with skimpy costumes and ostensibly suggestive dance moves – demonstrate conscious intent on the part of video makers and the artist to communicate the performer’s desire to be watched by the audience.

Spears’ video for the single “I’m a Slave 4 U”\textsuperscript{38} offers a hyper-sexualized family portrait in which the Western harem ideal explodes into an orgy of multiple male and female inhabitants with Spears as the dominant – though not powerful –

\textsuperscript{37} Mernissi, 11-14.

centerpiece. The video takes place on an upper floor of a high-rise building in a rather
dilapidated urban setting. From the open balcony in the large, bare room in which
most of the action takes place we can see the dull grayish building across the street.
Cars and buses zoom by on the street below, and street-level signs on the sides of
buildings all the way down the street display characters in an unspecified East Asian
language. The floor and walls of the room in which Spears and the other characters
dance are covered in wood and lighting is dim. Spears’ skin and that of the other
characters is very shiny as if they are sweating profusely, suggesting that the room is
stiflingly hot. Throughout the video, Spears and the others alternate between dancing,
milling about, and gazing – the others at Spears and each other, Spears at herself in a
mirror. When the cast dances, Spears is in front.

The cast of the video, shown all together only in a single frame thirteen
seconds into the video, is multiracial, including dancers who are noticeably of Asian
(Far Eastern), African, and European descent, any number of whom could actually be
of Latin American descent. While the group consists of roughly equal numbers of
male and female dancers, over half of the males have long hair, and all of the males
are of relatively small build, giving them a feminine quality. Adding to the gender
ambiguity is the fact that the dancers perform most of the choreography in unison,
leaving few gender distinctions in movement. Only when dancers are paired in
carious does gender differentiation seem to matter, and even then they are merely
significant for the pairing, not the ways in which the individuals relate to one another.
For this discussion, what is interesting about the blurred gender delineations, though, is that the entire cast is feminized. In addition, there is a marked absence of eye contact among the characters in the video, so it appears that the characters are interacting physically not for their own gratification but for the pleasure of an unseen witness: the audience. It turns out that the harem presented in this video is not run by Spears; she is merely a slave for us, which she tells us in no uncertain terms.

The song’s text is about desire and dancing:

All you people look at me like I’m a little girl
Well did you ever think it’d be okay for me to step into this world
Always saying, “Little girl, don’t step into the club”
Well, I’m just tryin’ to find out why ‘cause dancing’s what I love

I know I may come off quiet; I may come off shy
But I feel like talking, feel like dancing when I see this guy
What’s practical? What’s logical? What the hell; who cares?
All I know is I’m so happy when you’re dancing there

The subtext that permeates the song and is reinforced by the images in the video, however, is one of desire and sexual contact. The beginning of the video seems to hint that the song is an anthem for contemporary youth who “know [they are] young, but [they’ve] got feelings, too ... and need to do what [they] feel like doing,” but as the video unfolds, the group of young adults in this hot, cramped room seem trapped. Throughout the video, they are shown to be sweating, and at the end they all – except for Spears – rush onto the small balcony of the building to find relief from the heat in the rain that has just begun to fall. The urgency of their flight to the balcony – from which there is no escape but freefall ending in death – underscores that these are captive bodies. And they are available at every moment to ‘dance’ for us.
Spears does not flee to the balcony but continues to dance instead, seemingly oblivious to the heat that the others could no longer bear, proving that she is the most acquiescent of slaves. During the video, Spears is often separate from her cohort, and in many shots she is watched from afar with what seems to be equal parts desire and admiration by both male and female characters. While she is one of them, Spears clearly stands apart from the other characters, and in the context of harem/family, she appears to be an experienced courtesan to whom the others can look for lessons in seduction. When the cast joins in synchronized dancing, Spears leads them. Her physical disconnect from the rest of the cast, her decision to continue dancing, and her preference for her own reflection in various mirrors on the set mark her as different, while her indifference and self-infatuation indicate she has a sense of her own superiority to the others in the cast.

Spears' role is that of the blond – read: very white – mother of an international harem/family. But that role is not necessarily formulaic and predictable. In contrast to Spears' sexual family portrait, Mandy Moore’s video for the single “In my Pocket”\(^{39}\) offers a different view of the white Western woman among non-Western Others. The video features Moore in a carnivalesque setting – something of an Oriental funhouse – enjoying performances by groups and individuals of varied Asian heritages. The characters include acrobats and dancers, and Moore celebrates their performances with apparent joy and admiration and eventually joins the crowd in

dance. The action of the video takes place entirely indoors in an unknown location. The walls are decorated with various Oriental motifs including Middle Eastern-style tiles, neon signs of characters in an unspecified East Asian language, and gilded Buddhas. An archway separating the room into two is adorned with gilded dragons, reminiscent of imperial China. The floor is mirrored in some places, and everywhere it is strewn with bright confetti. Moroccan-style colored glass and metal lanterns hang from the ceiling. Moore walks through a dense throng of male and female characters, most of whom are young adults, although there are a small number of little girls present as well. In one scene, Moore is carried through an archway on the shoulders of four bare-chested young men who later dance for her. Throughout the video, Moore appreciatively watches individuals and groups of various ethnic backgrounds perform dance and acrobatics.

While Moore’s video lacks the hard edge of sexuality inescapable in Spears’ video, there are some nonetheless dangerous elements. The most disturbing aspect of the setting of Moore’s video is its carnivalesque feel. While it is refreshing to see the white Western main character, Moore, enjoying and celebrating difference rather than voraciously consuming and re-releasing it as her own, it is troubling that such difference is presented as a sweet, family-friendly freak show.

The group of bare-chested male dancers who represent Middle Eastern and possibly South Asian performance is the only group of obviously mixed ethnicity. This is only problematic, though, if we forget – or choose to remain ignorant of – the

Britney Spears, “I’m a Slave 4 U,” Greatest Hits: My Prerogative, DVD, directed by Francis

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fact that the Middle East and South Asia are inhabited by people of many skin colors, ranging from cocoa to porcelain. Thus, there is a truth to the casting of men of ambiguous ethnicity, whether such a truth was intended by the person or persons who cast the video.

Such bodily truths lie at the center of the next chapter. Since we now have an idea of how the harem/family is constructed, we should think more deeply about the ways that bodies take on subtextual meanings in other Orientalist paintings, in commercial art, and in other videos.
Chapter 2
The Bodily Work of Orientalist Representation

Britney Spears’ “I’m a Slave 4 U” and Mandy Moore’s “In My Pocket,” each discussed in the first chapter, are merely two instances of young American female pop artists’ use of ‘Oriental’ touches in their music videos. This section will explore more closely the presentation of female bodies by examining how the use of Oriental themes accents issues of race intersecting with common notions of beauty and stylishness in the wider popular culture surrounding American music videos. I argue that pop singers’ piecemeal borrowing of dance, music, and fashion from Oriental sources offers performers temporary escape from their own socially inscribed identities. Overall, I hope to show that the critique of Orientalism in Part One can be further nuanced by investigating issues of performers’ bodies in greater detail.

The En-lightened Body
In the book *Experiencing Music Video*, Carol Vernallis argues that music videos “are not whole but rather structured around bricolage, odd bits drawn from numerous sources that do not gel into a unified whole.”40 She distinguishes between film and music videos, pointing out that props and costumes in film serve primarily as vehicles for character development while the same objects and adornments in music videos prove far more ambiguous:

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In music video, however, we seldom know how to read the costume accessory. Perhaps the cigarette that he protagonist holds is there for thematic purposes, as an emblem, as an item that looks cool, or as an indication that the performer is a smoker.

Music videos can sustain touches that are personally meaningful to the director but inscrutable to an audience.41

How, then, can we ever hope to make sense of the music video? Perhaps our goal should not be to understand videos at all, but to experience them; Vernallis’s title and analytical approach lead us to the possibility that the music video is an experience, something that transcends typical ideas of ‘reading’ a text. By envisioning the music video as an experience, Vernallis sets it up as a cultural product that involves both intellect and affect, the viewing of which is a dynamic performance on the part of the audience.

This section explores style and fashion in the music video in the context of an ever-evolving vocabulary of bodily beauty that informs and is informed by the larger popular, youth, and consumer cultures. By affecting Othered identities, pop performers push to the margins the sources of their multicultural inspiration. In forcing others into the background, these performers are enacting a sort of violence that reduces their initial inspiration to fragmented collections of elements to be borrowed at will and freely presented out of context.

In Three Faces of Beauty, her study of transnational notions of beauty, ethnographer Susan Ossman suggests that attempts to understand cultural flow as linear occurrences are misguided and require more sensitivity. “We cannot,” she writes, “observe local bodies dressing up in global clothes.” She continues, stating

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41 Vernallis, 103.
that “to comprehend the powers that make up our faces requires a more dynamic sense of place and a less unified sense of time than those implied by such oppositions.”

What Ossman seems to propose is that there are many localities that do not easily coalesce into a unified whole and that the sites of exchange between localities create what many have erroneously construed as ‘global’ identities.

If what we have previously conceived of as global is actually a vast set of localities, American pop performers’ uses of Middle Eastern images should be viewed as a communication taking place in what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as the in-between space, an “inter” space in which newness is the essence of expression:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.

In adapting Bhabha’s in-between, which is rooted in the relationship between spans of time, to Ossman’s discussion of “anywhere bodies and faraway eyes,” we must think in terms of both time and space. Ossman argues that the study of border crossings requires that the researcher conceive of her work as choreography, which is well suited to the time-space duality. Moving “through connections,” she writes, “often implies returning in circular moves or an endless pas de bourré to the same spaces.”

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44 Ossman, 5-30.
This seems particularly apt when the local body belongs to the world’s largest
globalizing power; tracing backgrounds becomes central to the scholar’s quest.
Ossman notes that contemporary ethnography must trace countless backgrounds.
Such tracing is a process which defies binaries and emphasizes the hybridity of
cultural production, which Bhabha discusses in his work:

[A] willingness to descend into that alien territory ... may reveal that the theoretical
recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an
international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of
cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end, we
should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation,
that in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.45

Here Bhabha presents a very dramatic potential which resides within border
crossings and hybrid cultural landscapes such as those we encounter in music videos.
Understanding and inhabiting the in-between “makes it possible to begin envisaging
national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’.”46 Using Bhabha and Ossman as
theoretical backdrops, we are able to think more sharply about the appeal and use of
music videos in general. The videos discussed here present ‘Oriental’ womanhood as
something to be put on and taken off, and the ease with which this is done raises
questions about the role of identities presented in music videos. How do they
encourage performers to think of and portray others and, by the negation of the other,
themselves? Do performances of otherness create the possibility that “we may elude
the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves,” as Bhabha puts it?47

45 Bhabha, 38.
46 Bhabha, 38-39.
47 Bhabha, 39.
The potential I’ve recognized in Bhabha’s formulation of the in-between is, I would argue, dependent upon respectful acknowledgement of the boundaries which become blurred and are transgressed to create the in-between. In Bhabha’s language, these boundaries – or polarities – are comprised of various national cultures. Using Bhabha as a starting point, then, there seems to reside in the putting on and taking off of Oriental identity an obscured nationalist agenda.

David A. Hollinger’s *Postethnic America* offers a way of thinking more deeply about identities and affiliations and how they affect the in-between spaces of culture and the creation of newness. One of the most useful aspects of Hollinger’s book is the distinction drawn between identity and affiliation:

The preferred word in multiculturalist discourse is, of course *identity*. But the concept of identity is more psychological than social, and it can hide the extent to which the achievement of identity is a social process by which a person becomes affiliated with one or more acculturating cohorts. … Moreover, the word *identity* implies fixity and givenness, while the word *affiliation* suggests a greater measure of flexibility consistent with a postethnic eagerness to promote communities of consent. Affiliation is more performative, while identity suggests something that simply is.48

In the realm of the music video, the “acculturating cohorts” are not individuals with whom the artists or producers have actual contact. Therefore, their assumption of a transnational body is rather incomplete. However, we must not altogether dismiss international affiliations in the music video because Hollinger also argues that involuntary affiliations – such as race and ethnicity and, I would add, gender – are not the only affiliations that can produce ‘authentic’ identification.

A postethnic perspective … does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make. This perspective does challenge, very

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directly, a common prejudice to the effect that affiliations based on choice are somehow artificial and lacking in depth, while those based on the ordinance of blood and history are more substantive and authentic.\textsuperscript{49}

Throughout their careers, pop artists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries put on and take off a number of identities — or, rather, affiliations — demonstrating the flexibility about which Hollinger speaks. Such borrowings are pretty much expected in order to supply the audience with newness at every turn. However, pop artists’ costume changes still seem to require a more critical assessment than we might get from applying Hollinger as I have presented him here.

Ossman argues that, on one hand, the taking on of ‘exotic’ costumes is light:

The exoticism of images of oases and distant continents can be revelled in and in a sense ‘exploited,’ not only for commercial or imperialist ends, but also by those women who wish to engage with modern spaces and who might be seen as stereotyped by them. For indeed, in the process of our dreaming about the lightness of being that is implied in the modern body, these exotic images become only partially operational as indicators of distinctions between representation and lived experience.\textsuperscript{50}

On the other hand, the heavy body is pushed to the background, defying the transgressive potential of the blurring of lines between representation and lived experience and creating a divide between heavy and light bodies that is only bridged with great difficulty:

Those who feel they are able to engage with them participate in worlds of light that are explicitly distinguished from the ‘traditions’ they seem [emphasis mine] to incorporate. Meanwhile, those whose bodies bear the indelible marks that these images play with are cast into the shadows.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} Hollinger, 119.
\textsuperscript{50} Ossman, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{51} Ossman, 12.
Indeed, the light images of beauty with which some women play are actually quite heavy to the women from whom such images are ‘borrowed’, even when the representation only loosely resembles the presumed original.\(^{52}\)

Forgetfulness is central to the en-lightening of bodies and practices. As an example, Ossman writes that the practice of marking oneself with temporary imitations of Moroccan tribal tattoos “implies a forgetfulness with regard to such inscriptions while reworking them in terms of exoticism and nostalgia.”\(^{53}\) In translating permanent bodily inscriptions into fashion, Ossman notes that women are “abstracting elements from their context,” and this abstraction is central to the creation of lightness from heaviness. Meanings change as bits of identity are ‘borrowed’ from the heavy body and used to en-lighten another.

Ossman describes a Cairo fashion show in which disgust at the background body appears in the form of the desire to unveil the veiled body:

Fashion sets times in motion that promise progress but confuse linear history. It relies on unwearable remainders and forays into history or exotic places to find meaning. Perhaps, more than anything, it makes us think about how the process of “en-lightening” practices and bodies that makes them part of fashion requires a certain sense of revulsion at the sight of the heaviness and stasis that we conceive as giving birth to those very forms.\(^{54}\)

There is reason to believe that revulsion at the sight of the heavy body has as much to do with fear as it does impatience. In a particularly telling anecdote about

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\(^{52}\) I describe the background, or heavy, body here as a ‘presumed original’ because even the cultures from which materials for in-between identities are taken are, in truth, already in-between spaces in their own right. Therefore, the cultures explored in any ethnography are products of myriad ‘originals’.  

\(^{53}\) Ossman, 13.  

\(^{54}\) Ossman, 15.
culture clashes. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori introduce their study of Muslim politics by discussing perceptions of *beurrettes*\(^{55}\) donning of religiously symbolic headscarves in French schools.\(^{56}\) The white French citizens who opposed the veiling perceived the scarves as a symbol of the Muslims’ inability to conform to national notions of ‘Frenchness’, suggesting that open profession of the Islamic faith precluded inclusion in the French nation. The debate over schoolgirls’ headgear became a fight over issues of integration.\(^{57}\) Eickelman and Piscatori’s example points to the junction between the personal and the political; at the moment that veils were perceived as a threat to French national values, they transcended personal significance and gained political meaning.

Ossman also identifies veiling as a point of cultural misunderstanding between the West and the Muslim world and suggests that Western notions of Islamic veiling are too simplistic. Because much of the West perceives the veil as the main symbol of Muslim women’s oppression, there exists a belief that the removal of the veil will result in women’s immediate liberation.\(^{58}\) It would initially appear ironic, then, that unveiled culturally cross-dressing pop stars promote images of the Eastern feminine that deny the agency of the background body. However, Meyda Yegenoglu argues

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\(^{55}\) *Beur* is a term used to designate ethnically maghrebi (North African) residents in France. The term is flexible and can refer to immigrants, non-citizen residents, and citizens of North African descent.


\(^{57}\) Eickelman and Piscatori, 3.

\(^{58}\) Ossman, 17.
that European imperialists’ preoccupation with Muslim women’s veiling revealed their own fear of losing power:

The loss of control does not imply a mere loss of sight, but a complete reversal of positions: her body completely invisible to the European observer except for her eyes, the veiled woman can see without being seen. The apparently calm rationalist discipline of the European subject goes awry in the fantasies of penetration as well as in the tropological excess of the veil.  

In the end, by unveiling the women of the Orient, the music videos erase the potential danger of the Other’s power of mystery against imperialist encroachment.

In Fatima Mernissi’s work, however, we see the other speaking back and expressing shock as her heavy body is played with so lightly in the West. Mernissi is particularly critical of the ways in which Western conceptions of a playful, sensual harem ignore the dynamic history of the Middle East. She cites Turkish progressivism as an example of the legacies which the Western harem completely obscures:

In the 1920s when Matisse was painting Turkish women as harem slaves, Kemal Ataturk was promulgating feminist laws that granted Turkish women the right to education, the right to vote, and the right to hold public office. … Throughout the 1920s, Turkey had been the site of a radical struggle waged by a movement known as the “Young Turks,” who fought against three things perceived to be intimately linked: despotism, sexism, and colonialism.

Mernissi’s main complaint with the Western harem is that it indicates that Westerners “believe that Muslim men and women never dream of reform or aspire to be modern.” However, Mernissi’s Dreams of Trespass and Scheherazade Goes West as

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60 Mernissi, Scheherazade, 109.

61 Mernissi, Scheherazade, 111.
well as Leila Ahmed's memoir *A Border Passage*\(^6\) provide us with additional insight into the obscured background body – in both cases a dynamic, mobile female body that, rather than occupying a finite, static far away space, occupies the in-between, tracing a life between Western and Eastern academia on one hand and personal histories rooted in Morocco and Egypt, respectively, on the other. These two professors are decidedly modern women, and directly counter what Memissi rightly fears occupies Westerners’ minds.

Memissi and Ahmed show us that the heavy body can speak back, defying assumptions of their weakness. But another fascinating result of the en-lightening of bodies and practices is that the en-lightened body must accept its limitations. While the light body constantly purports to be boundless and infinitely flexible, the modern reality of en-lightened bodies is that en-lightening is a rather public endeavor, viewed by many. Through its borrowings and abstractions, the en-lightened body gives “the impression that everything has been manipulated, reworked, undone.”\(^6\) The light body obscures the background body through amnesia and revulsion. But Ossman points out that the heavy body can be reclaimed “by working through how beauties are produced.”\(^6\)


\(^{63}\) Ossman, 29.

\(^{64}\) Ossman, 30.
Putting on Light-as-Air

In *Scheherazade Goes West*, Memissi argues that the Western woman’s harem is not a physically bounded space; rather, she argues, it lies in unattainable standards of bodily perfection. The West values what Ossman terms the most modern of bodies – the disappearing body. While it is a stamp of modernity for women to abstract for their own use aspects of another locality, the most modern of bodies resists modern pressures by becoming physically light. Ossman writes that such bodies adopt “a politics of disappearance: becoming thin or nondescript seems the only way to both satisfy the dominant code and at the same time fail to fulfill what it purports to offer.”

Like Mari Yoshihara who argues in *Embracing the East* that American women engage in Orientalist acts, in part, in order to gain agency for themselves within male-dominated discourses of power, Ossman suggests that the body that disappears into its own thinness, its own material lightness, does so in opposition to standards that demand *meaning* of the feminine body. As stated above, the great limitation of the modern light body is that it has difficulty signifying because of the very borrowing that created it.

Even the bodies of female artists in whose performances cross-cultural borrowing is not as evident as in those of Britney Spears can exhibit this “politics of disappearance.” Such artists are considered artistically edgier. Here, one might think

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65 Ossman, 22.

of rockers Annie Lennox, Fiona Apple, and Alanis Morissette as well as soul star Erykah Badu. However, unlike these artists who seem to counter the “dominant code,” Spears’ body is not completely thin. While it is apparent that she undergoes rigorous physical training when preparing for the release of new albums or films or for the launch of a tour, she is fleshy and displays a tendency toward a heavy middle. Spears seems to escape the trap of failing to mean – at least physically – because she never fully attempts a politics of disappearance. Spears maintains a certain fleshiness which, no doubt, lends to her sensual appeal for her audience. In this way, a relatively physically heavy body nonetheless supports enlightened practices, specifically in the trying on and tearing off of Middle Eastern costumes and identities in music videos.

In order to assess Spears’ take on the Orient, we should look at how her public persona typically deals with race. Gavin James Campbell argues that Spears’ embracing a Southern identity early in her career was one way in which she “projects an overwhelming aura of whiteness.” In addition, Campbell notes, the South in which Spears locates herself is one devoid of blackness. It is significant that Spears’ Southern associations are rural because the videos in which her representations of the Orient are prominent take place in urban landscapes. In fact, Spears’ videos for “I'm a Slave 4 U” and “Toxic” take place in dilapidated and futuro-gothic video cityscapes, respectively. These two setting types represent urban extremes, neither of

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67 Gavin James Campbell, “‘I’m Just a Louisiana Girl’: The Southern World of Britney Spears,” Southern Cultures (Summer 2001): 84-85.
which is realistic. Thus, Spears’ Oriental images are set against distinctly unreal backdrops, emphasizing a disjunction between the ‘real’ Britney Spears – Southern and rural – and the vampy seductress Spears – non-place specific and urban. Ossman points out that rural settings are most often classified as heavy and traditional while urban settings are seen as light and modern. Spears can be seen, therefore, as undertaking two levels of en-lightenment – one within her own American regional context and another taken from the Orient. Spears asserts a quaint, rural Southern background to her own body while almost simultaneously presenting an urban public body. In this way, Spears uses Middle Eastern costume not only as a vehicle for an explicit sexual self-presentation, but also as a vehicle for moving away from the small-town imaginary and into the national mainstream.

Ossman notes that the act of en-lightening includes not only the trying on of costumes and the transcendence of rural spaces, but also the obscuring of one’s own heaviness. She cites the manipulation of hair color as the most typical manner in which women disguise their heaviness:

Bleaching and coloring hair fails to do away with our knowledge of the process that has made it. The new hair does not eliminate the other, darker, background hair that we can never see. ... [A] natural blonde would be unable to include two layers of hair in her self-presentation. By becoming blonde, on the other hand, you can display the change you are worth making. L’Oreal allows you to show this while at the same time permitting you to evoke a mythic, natural color past.

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70 Ossman, 5.
71 Campbell, 84.
72 Ossman, 25.
Britney Spears, Beyoncé Knowles, and Columbian-born singer Shakira – whose bellydancing has been a staple of her performance in the United States since her U.S. debut in 2001⁷³ – appear in public regularly with blond hair. Their occasional layering of hair color to include both light blond and darker brown gives the impression that they are in-between colors or that they are able to inhabit both blond and non-blond identities. Nonetheless, the elusive truth of the body – whether light or heavy – is continually obscured for each performer.

In the early 1990s, bell hooks took issue with pop superstar Madonna in her collection of essays, Black Looks. In a chapter entitled “Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?” hooks argues that Madonna’s claims that she admires and desires to

⁷³ Shakira’s bellydancing can be seen in most of her videos but is most prominent in the videos for “Whenever, Wherever” (“Suerte”), “Objection” (“Te Aviso, Te Anuncio”), “La Tortura,” and “Hips Don’t Lie.” Like Spears and Knowles, Shakira often makes use of the bared midriff, but her costumes are less obviously elaborate and have the appearance of street clothes. Also, Shakira’s physique is more muscular and petite than either Spears or Knowles. The result is that her rock-edged pop music backgrounds her bellydance far more casually.

Shakira is of mixed Columbian and Lebanese heritage, and she has been bellydancing since she was a little girl. She began her music career in her native Columbia where she was popular for her aggressive Spanish-language rock. When she officially crossed over into the U.S. music market with her first English-language release, Shakira’s music was generally categorized as pop. Shakira’s bellydance performance is often mixed with other dance genres as in “Objection” where she fuses tango and bellydance and in “Hips Don’t Lie,” which combines bellydance, ‘traditional’ Columbian dance, and Caribbean carnival dancing.


emulate black culture along with her appropriations of blackness and various other markers of Otherness tread a fine line. She writes, “The thing about envy is that it is always ready to destroy, erase, take-over, and consume the desired object.”

hooks asserts that Madonna’s inclusion of Others – blacks and gays, predominantly – in her videos and stage acts is not a revolutionary statement of unity but a betrayal of revolutionary possibilities. Because Madonna presents such Others as “defective,” she “is not breaking with any white supremacist, patriarchal status quo; she is endorsing and perpetuating it.”

hooks’ assessment of Madonna’s public image as presented in her film Truth or Dare reminds us of Ossman’s discussion of hair color and the inescapability of roots. hooks writes about Madonna’s dyed platinum blond hair, “we cannot see [her] change in hair color as being merely a question of aesthetic choice.” She suggests that we think about the fact that “the best blondes have all been brunettes” and how that information leads us to question the depth of “whiteness” we see in performers like Madonna – and, I would add, Spears.

hooks also argues that, in general, white displays of desire for the Other walk the line that she describes in detail in the case of Madonna; and, hooks argues, most often the tendency is to devour, rather than empower, the Other:


75 hooks, 163.

76 hooks, 158.
Contemporary notions of “crossover” expand the parameters of cultural production to enable the voice of the non-white Other to be heard by a larger audience even as it denies the specificity of that voice, or as it recoups it for its own use.77

Hottentot Video

Non-white performers are not alone in their Oriental cross-dressing. Beyoncé Knowles is currently a very popular performer. Following the success of her singing group Destiny’s Child, Knowles has also established herself as a solo artist as well as actress and spokesperson for L’Oreal cosmetics. In the video for the song “Baby Boy”78 from her first full-length solo album, Knowles performs solo bellydance. Because she is an African American, Knowles’ case is complicated by the United States’ unique history of race. How should we, therefore, examine her embodiment of an Other?

Spears locates her Orientalist embodiments in urban settings, and I have suggested above that such settings provide her with an escape from her own heavy background. Knowles, on the other hand, uses an isolated beachfront landscape to return her video character to a rural, heavy locale. The video for “Baby Boy” presents Knowles in five costumes – all but one baring the midriff – and settings with additional footage of the featured hip-hop/dancehall artist Sean Paul. Knowles and Sean Paul do not appear in any scenes together, but Knowles has a nameless male companion in two of her five scenarios. The video cuts quickly between Knowles’

77 hooks, 31.
and Sean Paul’s settings. Thus, it seems significant that the longest time spent in any setting is during a thirty second dance sequence toward the end of the video. The music for this section is spliced into the album version of the song and features hand drums, flute, and hand claps all brought together to emulate any number of music styles from the Orient. Knowles dances in a two-piece outfit complete with bare belly, gold fabric, and dangling coins.

By setting her bellydance performance in an isolated location that belies any nearby ‘modern’ architecture, Knowles seems to hope to assert a level of legitimacy in her portrayal of the Oriental feminine. Instead of transporting her character to fantastic urban settings, Knowles presents her bellydancing alter ego in a supposedly natural setting. By claiming legitimacy, Knowles also suggests a certain affinity between her ‘true’ African American self and her transnational video character. Whereas Beyoncé Knowles – the real historical person – cannot claim multiple national identities, her video persona can claim affiliations across national boundaries. Such affiliation can act as a tool for en-lightening the African American body, but it also conjures up pernicious sexualized racial hierarchies that have thrived in the United States for centuries.

In Part One I noted how artwork on the packaging of turn-of-the-century tobacco products was an early example of American popular Orientalist representation. Dolores Mitchell argues that the omnipresence of commercial art such as images of exotic women on tobacco packages had an impact on the American
imagination. Music videos are an example of present-day commercial art that reaches similarly broad audiences as early twentieth century tobacco art.

Mitchell also demonstrates that women depicted in turn-of-the-century commercial artwork were presented according to a generally accepted vocabulary of indexical references to preexisting racial stereotypes. In essence, images of exotic women were usable because they “could assume a wider range of roles, because their cultures were understood as relatively uncivilized and ‘other.’ … Because these exotic images represent stereotypes, they often encode the fears and desires of white males.”

Even though women’s smoking was considered a negative trait, the women associated with tobacco – both those who smoked and the fantastic multiethnic harem portrayed in tobacco art – possessed, for men, elements of adventure and sexual intrigue. Mitchell explains that the display of sexuality in tobacco art was racially and ethnically categorized; she writes that “the four common groups of ‘exotic’ women in tobacco art are Turkish, Spanish (including Gypsy), Native American, and African.”

Mitchell also describes certain tobacco art in which all these types came together to form a fantasy microcosm of women:

A large group of labels depicts women dressed as queens from these four ‘exotic’ groups, plus an additional woman who is white, assembled in a display of beauty. The white woman invariably commands the highest position in a pyramidal or semicircular composition. A Black woman in Egyptian costume

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80 Mitchell, 329.
is depicted in such groupings – because … the American Black woman is not shown as possessing true beauty, by white standards.\textsuperscript{81}

The racial transformation of the Black woman into an Egyptian – thus, borderline Oriental – illustrates the racial and sexual categorization in the tobacco art Mitchell examines. The Oriental woman of the tobacco harem was the most pliant, the Spanish the most coquettish and open to men’s advances, and the Native American the most active but relatively less sexual. Finally, Mitchell asserts, the Black woman was the least sexually desirable. In fact, except when she was depicted as Egyptian, the Black woman served as a comical figure to be laughed at but certainly not to be lusted after except as a joke.\textsuperscript{82}

Turn-of-the-century tobacco art was not the first instance in which Black female sexuality was presented as part-oddity, part-fascination, pure entertainment. Eighteenth century European travelers to southern Africa returned to Europe fascinated with the genitalia of so-called Hottentot\textsuperscript{83} women. In the nineteenth century, various ‘Hottentot women’ were exhibited in a number of Europe’s metropolitan hubs, most notably London and Paris. The most well-known of these exhibited women was Sarah Bartmann – also known as Saartjie Baartman (Dutch/Afrikaans). Sander Gilman writes,

\textsuperscript{81} Mitchell, 329-30.
\textsuperscript{82} Mitchell, 330, 338-40.
\textsuperscript{83} According to the \textit{Compact Oxford English Dictionary}, the word Hottentot was “used to refer to the Khoikhoi peoples of South Africa and Namibia … The word Hottentot is now regarded as offensive with reference to people (were Khoikhoi or, specifically, Nama, are the standard terms) but is still used in the names of some animals and plants.” The word’s origin is most likely Dutch, “perhaps a repetitive formula in Khoikhoi dancing song, transferred by Dutch sailors to the people themselves, or from German hotteren-totteren ‘stutter.’” I think the latter is most likely the case. Oxford University Press, “Hottentot,” \textit{Ask Oxford}, http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/hottentot.
Sarah Bartmann had been exhibited not to show her genitalia, but rather to present to the European audience a different anomaly, one that they (and pathologists such as de Blainville and Cuvier) found riveting: her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, a physical characteristic of Hottentot females which had captured the eye of early travelers. For most Europeans who viewed her, Sarah Bartmann existed only as a collection of sexual parts.84

Gilman argues that nineteenth century pathology forwarded the idea that behavior, especially sexual behavior, was a function of morphology; ‘scientific’ interest in Bartmann’s preserved genitalia was expressed as a sort of biological synecdoche. Thus, “Bartmann’s sexual parts [put on display after her death in 1815] serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century.”85

bell hooks brings discussion of the Hottentot Venus into the twentieth century arguing that the legacy of Bartmann’s protruding buttocks, rather than her genitalia, continues to mark Black female sexuality. She notes that Josephine Baker was “content to ‘exploit’ white eroticization of black bodies” and “many of Baker’s dance moves highlighting the ‘butt’ prefigure movements popular in contemporary black dance.”86 Knowles has inherited Baker’s butt-centric legacy. She has been credited with coining the term ‘bootylicious,’ the title of a 2001 single by her group Destiny’s Child,87 an the term is now often used in entertainment news media to describe her.

hooks also looks to popular culture, especially pop music, as a site of sexualized depictions of Black femininity:

85 Gilman, 88.
86 hooks, 63.
Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious. Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant.88

Knowles’ performance of Middle Eastern- and South Asian-inspired bellydance injects the Orientalist notions of Oriental female availability discussed in Part One into the racialized sexuality that hooks describes. Knowles is not the only African American singer of the period to incorporate Oriental themes in her videos.

An online review of the 2002 video “Addictive” by African American artist Truth Hurts, which samples a 1987 Hindi song called “Thoda Resham Lagta Hai,”89 connects the black artist’s performance with current international affairs. Reviewer Chris Fitzpatrick locates the roots of pop music producers’ interest in ‘exotic,’ faraway locales in U.S. involvement in the Middle East and Central Asia. In so doing, Fitzpatrick reveals the underpinnings of Americans’ enjoyment of exotic sounds while demonstrating producers’, artists’, and audiences’ lack of understanding of what those sounds are actually about:

“... it simply does not matter how the lyrics translate, only what preconceptions are embedded in the sound. The result is yet another layer of chaos: two completely unrelated narratives going on simultaneously, in different languages, only one of which is known to the average listener. The sampled Hindi lyrics describe a garland of wedding flowers that are...


88 hooks, 66.

89 The composer of the song sampled in “Addictive” sued the song’s producers because he was not credited for the sample. Gil Kaufman, “Judge Rules Truth Hurts’ Album Must Be Pulled or Stickered,” VH1.com, VH1, http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1459838/02042003/truth_hurts.jhtml.
“beautiful” but “bittersweet,” while the English lyrics tell the clichéd “Bonnie and Clyde” story, drug life and thug love, so familiar from previous hip-hop tracks, from “Gangsta Bitch” to “Down Ass Bitch.”

Fitzpatrick hits the mark in connecting pop cultural production with international politics. Both Spears and Knowles’ examples highlight the fact that the putting on of ‘foreign’ costumes and appropriation of ‘exotic’ movements and sounds can obscure regional and racial differences that can cause disjuncture in what is assumed to be a seamless national identity. However, such ‘borrowings’ do not merely function nationally, but internationally as well.

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Conclusion

To conclude, I will consider an important question: How does Orientalist representation in pop music videos relate to the wider topic of American international relations and the politics of nationalism? Because the modern nation and its attendant nationalism can be traced to the broader phenomena of modernity, a consideration of how conditions of modernity as conceived in the West will help illuminate how Orientalist representation fits into a discussion of modern international politics.

The age of modernity has seen the advent of travel and communication technologies that bring the world together, now in a fraction of a second. But the increased opportunities for contact provided by such technologies do not inherently inspire internationally egalitarian communication and conduct. The sad irony of the information technology of late modernity is that ideas travel faster than ever before, but the abundance of thought does not seem to inspire larger percentages of people to investigate what they see and hear so quickly.

This irony is not limited to the individual’s experience. The modern focus on the individual encourages preoccupation with the self, particularly its definition and development. In defining selves, modern individuals come to understand themselves as distinct from others. The development of nationalisms, particularly as they are defined in contrast to ‘others,’ could be seen as an extrapolation of the modern focus on self. Psychology has developed as a means of diagnosing and treating the self, but it has also been a means of diagnosing others. Just as a sense of self can be translated on a broader scale into national interest, psychology of individuals can be used as a
search for pathological explanations for ‘foreign’ groups’ difference. Jonathan Rée takes the connection between individual and nation one step further, arguing that “people will gladly kill for their nation, and gladly die for it, because they somehow manage to identify its life with their own.”\(^9^1\)

With life and death tied into the nation, maintaining a comforting level of ‘rightness’ in the nation’s identity is more than a simple question of ideology. Rather, otherness is viewed as a threat to the nation and, by extension, to the nationalist individual’s selfhood. Therefore, locating illness and oddity in non-nationals is much like a defense mechanism for entire nations. When others are portrayed as depraved or sick, attacking them becomes a nation defense mechanism whereby the nation constitutes itself in opposition to those others. For instance, Rée notes that “killing foreigners is a well-known recourse for governments in democratic states facing difficult electoral contests.”\(^9^2\)

National power can also be bolstered by the repetition of stereotypes of others. Homi Bhabha writes that “a stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive.”\(^9^3\) Such anxiety often finds its

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\(^9^1\) Rée notes that this assignment of the national to the individual was promoted by Erik Erikson, a noted psychiatrist of the 1950s, whose doctrine of developed psyches required “mature” or “strong identity.” Of America in the latter half of the twentieth century Rée writes, “National identity ceased to mean the enduring and possibly buried elements that supposedly bind together a national group, and started to mean its collective self-image, and by further extension it was also applied to individuals insofar as they shared that self-image: each of them had an individual ‘national identity,’ but in each of them it was exactly the same.” Jonathan Rée, “Cosmopolitanism and the Experience of Nationality,” in Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 84, 86.

\(^9^2\) Rée, 79.

\(^9^3\) Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 70.
inspiration in sexual stereotyping of demeaned others. Sander Gilman explores the racialization of ‘grotesque’ sexuality and madness in *Difference and Pathology*, noting that root metaphors – a list of structural categories from which persons interpret facts about others – provide a framework for the ways in which people understand and think about others.94

Sexual contact with others is a link between the national and the individual primarily because it entails private relations between individuals which, according to nationalist angst, can lead to the undermining of the nation. Bhabha casts this tension in the context of colonialism:

> The stereotype, then, as the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a similar fantasy and defence – the desire for an originality which is again threatened by the differences of race, colour and culture. My contention is splendidly caught in Fanon’s title *Black Skin, White Masks* where the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’ that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego. The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.95

When viewing difference through the related lenses of modernity and nationalism, the distinctions between such notions as private and public, political and cultural, entertainment and education, individual and national appear increasingly arbitrary. Indeed, such delineations distract us from realizing that the personal and political are one, not because they fall under some vague rubric of modernity, but

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95 Bhabha, 75.
because the lives of individuals are interwoven with the life of the state. In the music videos discussed in this paper, the personal performances projected into private homes both reflect and contribute to public understandings and discussions of what it means to be American and what it means to not be non-American.

The music videos that inspired this paper present decidedly international – as opposed to cosmopolitan – perspectives on personhood. The difference between the two is important because the international perspective assumes the centrality of the nation in people’s experience of the globe whereas a cosmopolitan perspective recognizes nations as localities that are connected to other localities in ways that transcend political boundaries.

When, for instance, Britney Spears bares her midriff and performs bellydance-inspired choreography, she is not automatically becoming a citizen of the world in some inclusive, ideal cosmopolitan sense. Those performers who challenge the policies of their own or another nation-state or who challenge the basically arbitrary categorization inherent in thinking from the nation are performing with a cosmopolitan stance in mind. Such a stance allows for meaningful affiliation in the world beyond the nation.96 While the cross-cultural casts of a number of the videos examined here seem to suggest a desire for such broadened spheres of potential affiliation, they

96 The same search for affiliation beyond given boundaries has been used as the impetus for a number of authors writing about racial and ethnic difference. Among these are David A. Hollinger’s Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1995]), Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres’s The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a collection of writings on cosmopolitanism at the dawn of the twenty-first century, see Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
actually reinforce a worldview based in nationalism and often reflective of racist nationalist agendas.

As the state negotiates its relationships with other nations, it is also negotiating its citizens’ relationships with those other nations. One of the prominent organs of U.S. public diplomacy in the “War on Terror” is public diplomacy meant to win the hearts and minds of Muslims in the Arab world.

Radio Sawa, which broadcasts both American and Arabic pop music in addition to regular news bulletins in over twenty cities in the Arab Middle East and North Africa, has been a large part of the information war. Ali Abunimah, in an article published on the website Electronic Intifada calls Radio Sawa’s programming “deceptively innocuous.”

Abunimah reports that one of the stations’ deceptions is that the source of information is not identified. Unlike those of Britain’s BBC Arabic Service and France’s Radio Monte Carlo, both of which are heard in similar markets in the Arab Middle East, Radio Sawa’s news reporters do not announce their names, lending the stations “an exceptionally sterile and anonymous quality.”

The official website for Radio Sawa is not particularly illuminating, either. Unlike the websites of other U.S. government organs that are found on the Internet with addresses ending in “.gov,” Radio Sawa – as well as its television counterpart, al-Hurra – has a URL ending in “.com,” suggesting a purely commercial site as opposed to one funded by the U.S. Congress and run by U.S. International Broadcasting.

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98 Abunimah, “Radio Sawa.”
office of the U.S. government. The site’s only page containing English text provides a few short paragraphs of information about Radio Sawa, informing its audience that the stations are “dedicated to broadcasting accurate, timely and relevant news about the Middle East, the world and the United States.” The rest of the site is in Arabic and contains “relevant news” stories. Unless they can read Arabic, Americans cannot assess the information that their own government is presenting in their name.

Abunimah suggests that actual reception of Radio Sawa does not have the affect desired by its broadcasters:

If the United States government thinks it is going to make people in the Arab world believe that its unconditional support for the Sharon government, and its threatened invasion of Iraq are really good for them just because Americans have learned to speak Arabic, then it is dreaming. If, however, the U.S. intention was to provide light entertainment to people as they ride in taxis, then it has come up with a sure fire scheme for success.

Abunimah writes that, during a visit to Jordan in 2002, “it seemed that [Radio Sawa] was blaring from every radio” and “the throbbing beats of Britney Spears could be heard emerging from more than a few taxis.” Because Spears’ videos are available online, one cannot simply separate her on-air presence in cities of the Middle East. Radio Sawa’s listeners have potential access to the Orientalist images of her “I’m a Slave 4 U” video as well as other similar videos that present a world of ‘Oriental’ fashion, movement, music, and sensibility very much unfamiliar to them. The disconnect between the absence of attempts at cultural understanding in these images

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100 Abunimah, “Radio Sawa.” Lebanese-American filmmaker Maya Mikdashi reported to me in a personal conversation that young Lebanese listeners are fully aware that Radio Sawa is a production of
and Radio Sawa’s claimed commitment to “respect for the intelligence and culture of its audience”\textsuperscript{101} is vast. The end result is that Spears and other American artists featured on the stations come to stand for American arrogance and encroachment.

Ultimately, it is difficult – and not at all fruitful – to argue that the U.S. government is directly responsible for Orientalist media images or that such images shape official policy. However, taken together, official policy and popular culture representations create an overall portrait not only of misunderstanding, but also of willful ignorance of the peoples of the Orient. My intention in examining the ways in which contemporary music videos continue the conventions of Orientalist representation has been to suggest that by interrogating the images of national, racial, or ethnic ‘Others’ that we encounter daily we can see beneath their slick veneers and begin to reject their piecemeal borrowings in favor of actual interactions with the people they claim to represent.

\textsuperscript{101} U.S. International Broadcasting, “Radio Sawa.”
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Vita

Maya Ayana Johnson, born in 1980, was educated in the Henrico County Public School system. She attended George Mason University, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Government and International Politics in 2002. In the summer of 2002, Maya participated in the Southside Virginia Writing Project Summer Institute at Virginia State University. She entered the two-year Arab Studies Program at Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies in the fall of 2002, working with Dr. Susan Ossman, and earned a Master of Arts in Arab Studies with a concentration in Culture and Society in 2004. After spending a summer interning in the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Maya entered the American Studies Program at the College of William and Mary. She expects to receive her Master of Arts in American Studies in 2007. Dr. Grey Gundaker is serving as Maya’s thesis advisor.

Maya’s research interests center on the creation of meanings and identity formation through American popular culture from the mid-twentieth century to the present. She is especially interested in how African Americans and other marginalized groups negotiate American cultural landscapes. Maya has on-going interests in social and concert dance, ranging from Afro-Cuban dance forms to international cabaret bellydance to classical ballet. She has studied both Spanish and Arabic on the college level and continues to seek ways in which to integrate her interests in humanist cosmopolitanism with her work in American Studies.